

A Universal Vision of Human Goodness and Social Transformation

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The world needs our help, and this is truer today than at any other time in our history. No amount of governmental legislation, regulation, or programming will be sufficient to address the challenges of global warming, unchecked consumerism, growing capitalist exploitation of human and environmental resources, gross social inequality and inequity, and widespread violence and fear if we do not *awaken and connect personally, interpersonally, and as a global society with the innate goodness of ourselves, humanity, society, and the environment in which we live*. That is the core challenge of our time. Our collective exploitation of our planet's resources and the cultures and institutions we have

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based on the model of winners and losers, punishment and reward, blame and shame all evolved from our individual and collective sense of unworthiness and incompleteness and from the mistaken notion that humanity is somehow innately flawed and inherently dangerous.

We can, however, reawaken our individual and collective connection with the innate goodness of humanity, which historically has been the most widespread view of humanity across cultures, through the deep and meaningful contemplative and social practices within each of our traditions. Within the Catholic Church, St. Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton, for whom Jesus Christ was the perfect embodiment and example of compassionate engagement in the world, can serve as role models for all of us. This reawakening is what motivates the passionate, deeply committed, and meaningful social engagement that is needed at this especially crucial time.

At its heart, the goal of our Shambhala Buddhist tradition is social. We aim to work collaboratively with the Catholic Church, other Buddhist traditions, and all others to address the root causes of a society based on fear and collectively to uplift society based upon a deep appreciation for and confidence in the innate and completely perfect goodness of all beings, thereby creating a society grounded in genuine and heartfelt care. For this reason, we are personally inspired by what we sense to be a similar inspiration on the part of Pope Francis and other leaders within the Catholic Church. Given the enormity and the urgency of the challenges we face, the urgent nature of the need, and our mutual commitment to meaningful action, it appears that this is a perfect time for us to explore how we can collaborate closely.

The Pope's Encyclical on the Environment

Since Pope Francis will have released his pending encyclical by the time of our conference, we thought it timely to address briefly the challenge of the environment from a Buddhist point of view. As we all know, the United Nations Climate Change Conference will be held in Paris from November 30 to December 11, 2015. Its goal is to limit temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels by achieving a binding agreement from all nations. The gap between the magnitude of the necessary change and what individual nations are prepared to do is huge. National and international forces will continue to oppose efforts aimed at environmental protection. This is certainly true in the United States.

Governments primarily address the environmental challenge by regulating greenhouse gas emissions and planning for climate adaptation. These measures are and will continue to be helpful. However, industry and governmental officials indirectly employed by industry will oppose those efforts. Because of their focus on achieving profitable growth for shareholders and their strong incentives to do so, without a significant shift in mindset, corporate leaders will continue to act in ways that damage the environment, exploit the disadvantaged, and put the future of society at risk. The sheer force of consumerism will also hamper environmental protection. Although some progress has been made in this area and seems likely to continue, it is unlikely that governments will be able to impose and maintain regulations that are strong enough.

And, importantly, environmental regulation and adaptation planning, though helpful, do not address the root causes of the problem. How we treat the environment has everything to do with how we view ourselves, each other, and the world we live in. Pope

Francis's encyclical stresses the importance of a *mental change*—in the way we experience ourselves, each other, and nature. From a Buddhist point of view, the extent to which we can connect with our own innate goodness, the innate goodness of others, and the natural world has everything to do with whether or not we will be able to bring about the needed shift. Regulation alone will not accomplish this.

The great religious traditions of the world understand this. Pope Francis, Cardinal Turkson, Cardinal Tauran, and other deeply compassionate leaders of the Catholic Church have spoken to this challenge with great warmth, humanity, energy, wisdom, and eloquence. All of us are increasingly stirred to greater action by what is occurring. Collectively our leaders and communities play a significant role in bringing about the personal and social transformation that is needed to address the challenge. We can also exert an influence on governments and corporations.

A Foundation for Social Transformation: Cultivating Innate Brilliance and Compassion

The methods within each of our traditions for connecting with the innate goodness of ourselves and others, with the original inspiration for our social institutions, and with the sacredness and goodness of the environment can play a key role in protecting the environment and transforming our society. Therefore it is important that we share these practices not only within but also beyond our own religious communities. One does not have to be a Catholic or a Buddhist to awaken one's connection to the innate goodness of humanity and the environment. We can do this whether we are religious or not. When our minds and hearts are fully open and available to ourselves and others, compassion arises spontaneously

as a natural response to suffering and need. Deep training in this mindset does not depend on any one tradition, but is the basis for all genuinely beneficial activity in the world.

Mindfulness and Awareness Practice: Becoming Fully Human

The primary method we practice, which is a foundation for all other socially focused practices in our tradition, is mindfulness and awareness meditation. This form of meditation differs from meditation as a form of stress reduction, which spurred the growth of the mindfulness movement in North America, Europe, and beyond. The objective of our practice is wisdom, compassion, and compassionate engagement in society, not merely the reduction of stress, as helpful as that might be.

From a traditional perspective, practicing mindfulness and awareness is a lifelong journey that leads to the complete realization of wisdom and compassion for the benefit of oneself and others. At the beginning of the practice, one works on developing clarity, stability, and strength, the three qualities of mind that serve as a basis for all other stages that follow. It is difficult to engender empathy and altruism, for example, if one has difficulty holding one's mind and heart on what someone else is feeling. Therefore one begins by developing these three qualities of mind.

Stability

Stability refers to the mind's ability to stay with the object of its attention: for students to keep their attention in the classroom; for you to be with your friend and listen as he or she is telling you of their experience; for physicians to be fully present and available to their patients so that they receive the full value of the physician's

experience and training; for you to taste and fully enjoy your food as you are eating it.

Clarity

Clarity is the mind's ability to know itself. This capacity allows us to see that we are thinking or to recognize an emotion when it arises in our experience. We experience the texture of the emotion, directly and without judgment.

Strength

Strength is the mind's ability to recognize when it has wandered and to bring itself back.

Understanding these three qualities of mind develops in us a clear view of how to engage in the meditation practice. This, in turn, develops confidence, which increases the effectiveness of the practice.

The Echo of Awareness

As we practice, we begin to develop an echo of awareness. When a strong emotion arises, for example, we begin to notice a gap in which the mind is simply aware of the experience—a gap in which we can decide whether to continue to fuel the sense of frustration, impatience, or anger, for example, or to simply let it be as it is. We begin to notice moments where the mind is simply present. Over time those gaps widen and the echo becomes stronger. We begin to notice that we are better able to listen to what others are saying. We begin to notice our projections for what they are, without being hard on ourselves. In general, we begin to develop a sense of familiarity and friendliness with our own mind and experience.

This gap of awareness, for example, enables young adults in violent situations in the neighborhoods of Chicago to notice and cut the continuity of aggression. And it creates the opportunity for others to listen to them. So much of the violence that erupts occurs out of a sense of not being listened to. Over time, the more we practice, and the more we are able to practice intensively, the more we remove the layers that obscure our potential to be fully human and of genuine benefit to ourselves and others. The practice unfolds in natural stages.

Exchanging Self and Others

We also have more advanced practices in which we “exchange self and others”; we breathe in the suffering of others and breathe out the opposite, acting as human air conditioners of sorts. Other practices involve cultivating kindness, compassion, equanimity (freedom from bias), and sympathetic joy for others.

Connecting with the Innate Goodness of Humanity and the Environment

As we develop our practice, we intentionally cultivate a recognition of the innate goodness, kindness, strength, and wisdom of ourselves, others, and society. Goodness, though it may be temporarily obscured, is innate; it is unconditionally present as who we are, the innate unconditional goodness of our basic being. This practice in particular brings our activity out from our centers and into our communities.

Ethics and Morality in Presenting Mindfulness in a Secular Context

Some have expressed concerns about what seems to be an absence of ethics in the way mindfulness is being presented in secular

contexts. Some people have pointed to the importance of ethics in the Buddhist tradition, for example, and the important transformative role that ethics plays in that context. The concern is that without some form of ethical framework mindfulness can be used as another tool for perpetuating corporate exploitation, military aggression, and so on. Within the military, for example, though mindfulness can be an effective method for working with post-traumatic stress disorder, it can also be used to help soldiers become more effective at killing. Within corporations, mindfulness can be used to drive deeper levels of employee engagement for the sake of increased productivity and profit. And it can be used to pacify the stress, complaints, and emotional “acting out” that become obstacles to productivity within such environments.

Within the Buddhist tradition, we do not care for others or protect and care for the environment because it is morally or ethically right alone. Nor do we do so because it is our moral duty as a Buddhist. Rather, we care for ourselves, others, and the environment out of the deep sense of care and appreciation the practice uncovers. As we train in the mindfulness of breathing, for example, with the breath we dissolve our attention out into the atmosphere of the room. The more we leave behind the focus on ourselves, the more we appreciate and are moved by the experiences of others.

Understanding Cause and Effect and Recognizing Interdependence

We also develop a heightened sense of cause and effect, a clarity about the impact of what seem to be insignificant actions or thoughts. We see these things and their interconnections and interdependence directly and personally. And therefore we develop much greater care in our conduct. This comes not out of a sense of morality but from direct seeing and from the experience

of love that comes from leaving our self-fixation behind, even if only in short moments. The wisdom and compassion that develops through training are the heart of the matter. It is the emphasis on wisdom and compassion that needs to be strengthened in how mindfulness is presented in secular contexts.

Wisdom

In the early stages of Shambhala Buddhist practice, “wisdom” has to do with the realization of selflessness, impermanence, and the causes and nature of “basic anxiety.” That wisdom contributes enormously to an overall sense of well-being, and it establishes the basis for kindness toward ourselves and others. As we practice, we begin to glimpse wisdom that is (1) innate and unconditioned, (2) inherent in all seeming states of confusion, (3) inherent in the basic ground of being, and (4) inherent in the goodness of humanity. We begin to understand what Plato referred to when he spoke of “The Form of the Good,” the basis of all knowing and virtue.

Practicing and Engaging as a Community

We engage in these practices not only personally but also as a community. Doing so as a community is key. And the universally accessible cultural forms that support this sense of community are equally important.

Fraternity

In our commitment to these practices, to service to others, and to addressing the seemingly insoluble challenges of our time, we feel a kindred spirit with many of the deep contemplatives and socially engaged leaders within the Catholic tradition: with Thomas Merton and St. Francis of Assisi, for example. These are deep

contemplatives who discovered/uncovered what is universally true and sacred and were therefore passionately committed to serving the welfare of others in whatever way they could. The challenge for all of us today is working together across our traditions and creating collaboratively a society that embodies these principles. How do we work together, as Catholics, Buddhists, Muslims, secularists, members of Native American traditions, and so on, to bring about the needed change of heart and mind?

What Can We Do?

As a basis for fraternal collaboration we can:

- Provide opportunities for all of us to reconnect with our own innate goodness as human beings, to become more fully human.
- Develop an appreciation and sense of deep care for ourselves, each other, and the natural world.
- Develop a greater appreciation for the depth of wisdom, compassion, and skill within each other’s traditions.
- Address the root causes that drive excessive consumerism, exploitation, violence, and social inequality.
- Dissolve the fear and doubt in the innate goodness of humanity that is at the root of religious fundamentalism and extremism.
- Develop a strong commitment to working for the benefit of others.
- Build bridges that link our religious and spiritual traditions with the needs of society.
- Apply the wisdom of our traditions in practical ways within society.

- Collaborate closely in addressing the challenges within each city.
- Cut through any sense of ignorance or complacency.
- Create a universal culture based on genuine care, wisdom, and compassion.
- Achieve the social transformation that is needed.

Our individual and interreligious efforts to heal and transform the suffering and to avoid the real dangers arising from injustices in U.S. society need to address many critical issues, including but not limited to:

- The extreme disparity between a wealthy elite and everyone else in our society;
- The obscene disparity between a wealthy elite and the poor and marginalized in our society;
- The economic influence of a small wealthy elite on our political system;
- An out-of-control prison industrial complex that houses twenty-five percent of the world's prisoners and is driven by failed policy and moral outrage, especially given the severe overrepresentation of people of color, the poor, and the undereducated in our jails and prisons;
- Violence against and exploitation of women and children;
- The existence of the death penalty and its disproportionate impact on people of color and the poor;
- Rampant consumerism and unjust consumption;
- Homelessness and poverty;
- A second- or third-tier public education system.

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